DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 345 380 EA 023 981

AUTHOR Newman, Jay B.
TITLE Student Participation in Your School Improvement Program.
PUB DATE Feb 92
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Association of Secondary School Principals (San Francisco, CA, February 14-18, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Decision Making Skills; *Educational Improvement; High Schools; *Participative Decision Making; School Based Management; *Student Participation

ABSTRACT

Educator's decisions affect the lives of students, and it is for this reason that input from students about their school life is important. A major concern of educators is that students will make irresponsible decisions, but experience shows that they will make excellent decisions when guided in the decision-making process by a caring and open adult. To establish an environment that encourages students to value their school experience, schools must involve them in important decision making efforts. This paper gives an explanation as to how Sturgis High School brought a large group of students into the school improvement process. Three areas of focus are detailed. The first is goal setting, having the students dream and visualize what school can be. The second is strategic planning, getting the students involved in developing ways to achieve the school's goals. The third focus area is decision making, where it becomes necessary to make some decisions concerning what will be implemented, what will be put on hold, what will be scrapped. A model by Willis Furtwengler (1990-91) useful in this decision making process is explained. A section on getting students involved concludes the paper. (RR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED345380

STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN YOUR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM

PRESENTED TO NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SECONDARY SCHOOL
PRINCIPALS ANNUAL CONVENTION - SAN FRANCISCO
FEBRUARY 14 - 18 1992

Jay B. Newman

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

J. Newman

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

EA 023981

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN YOUR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM

PRESENTED TO NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SECONDARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS ANNUAL CONVENTION - SAN FRANCISCO FEBRUARY 14 - 18 1992

SESSION SUMMARY

A step-by-step explanation as to how Sturgis High School brought a large group of students into the School Improvement process. The focus will be on goal development, strategic planning, decision-making, and consensus building.

INTRODUCTION

As we look at any high school, we see that the most important function of any high school is to prepare each student for life beyond high school. What ever direction they take, what ever decision they make, our goal must be to help them be successful and to become functional participants in their society. To best accomplish this, we need to help them get involved and teach them some sound decision-making techniques.

As educators, every decision we make will impact the lives of our students. For that reason we need to gain important input from our students about their school life and the decisions that need to be made. A major concern of educators is that students will make irresponsible decisions but experience shows us that they will make excellent decisions when guided in the decision-making process by a caring and open adult.

To get students involved in these processes, many schools have tried a variety of approaches. Unfortunately, most schools use a limited contact approach. That is, they invite a few select individuals to sit in on restructuring meetings and listen to adult discussions about what they are going to do. Believe me, that does not work. It does not work for the same reason that letting teachers listen to what administrators are planning to do does not empower teachers. Empowerment comes only when their is meaningful participation in the discussion and the decision-making process.

In this age of Outcomes-Based Education (OBE), we are forced into a situation where we must look at how do we best change the outcomes of schools. In schools, our most critical outcome is the quality of our students. The best way to improve that outcome is to help create a desire in students to change themselves.

Quality experiences, for anyone, will only occur when the people involved value the intended outcomes enough to make them part of their "quality world." (Glasser, 1991) The more involved students become in the school restructuring process, the greater the value they will place on the goals of restructuring. (Furtwengler, 1990) Consistent growth in the valuing of school

EA023981

goals, on the part of a school's student body, makes a significant positive impact on the school's climate. Furtwengler believes that the school's climate is a product of how people in the school feel about the decision-making processes. Involved students feel better about their schools. (Furtwengler, 1990, 1991) The better students feel about their school experience the greater the chance that school will become part of their "quality world." (Glasser, 1991)

To establish an environment that encourages students to value their school experience, schools must involve them in important decision making efforts. To get students to take an active role in restructuring requires a very specific plan. Involvement will not happen just because we want it to. In many instances students do not trust the adult authorities of most schools and most adults do not trust the students. Thus, a plan must be created and implemented if involvement is to occur. The plan we have used at Sturgis High School is a 3 part plan.

GOAL SETTING

A GOAL IS A DREAM TAKEN SERIOUSLY
TO HAVE A GOAL YOU MUST FIRST LEARN HOW TO DREAM

The first step in helping students become effective team members on your school improvement team is to re-teach them how to dream. Many students have forgotten how to dream. It may be necessary to take students through an exercise that makes them look at their world as a future world. One possibility is to ask them to envision an ideal world twenty years from now and describe what it will be like. Once they have defined that ideal world, ask them to explain how it got that way from what it is today. This will help them start to dream about the way the world, and school, can be.

Once students begin to dream and visualize what school can be, they need to feel that they can make a difference. There are three key variables to this feeling of empowerment:

1. Inclusion; students must know that they are wanted as part of the team. The burden for making this happen lies on the administration and teaching staff. The person who feels "in" achieves, cares, and succeeds. We can help students feel "in" by sharing information about our school and our ideas about school improvement, interacting with them as important members of our school community rather than as part of superior-subordinate power relationship, and by allowing them to have a voice during discussion and a choice in decision-making.
2. Control; if students are included in developing the dream, they will accept the vision that results from the dream. Rather than having to control students

through heavy handed punishment, students are controlled by the common vision. Coercion creates minimal compliance and disconnectedness. A common vision results in quality compliance and loyalty to the dream.

3. Affection; this, perhaps, is the most important variable. School leaders must demonstrate, on a regular basis, that they truly care for every member of the school community. People who care treat each other with dignity and respect.

The final step is to set the goals that match the dream. At Sturgis High School our DREAM, in the student own words is:

"ALL PEOPLE CAN LEARN. IT'S THE JOB OF EVERY MEMBER OF OUR SCHOOL COMMUNITY TO HELP PUT TOGETHER THE BEST POSSIBLE CONDITIONS TO INSURE THAT LEARNING TAKES PLACE."

Based on this dream, we decided on the following goals:

1. Improve work-habits
2. Improve communication skills
3. Improve everyone's sense of well being
4. Increase our awareness of our world
5. Improve problem-solving/critical thinking/creative thinking skills.

STRATEGIC PLANNING

One of the best uses of students, in the school improvement process, is to get them involved in developing ways to reach your goals. If we take the time to listen to them and include them as partners in our efforts, we will learn that they know what works for them. We will learn that they understand that motivation to succeed comes from within the student but at the same time that motivation will stem from how much they value the potential gains and whether or not they expect their efforts to result in success. With their help we can develop strategies that create valued rewards and we will establish conditions that will make the reward-effort relationship equitable in the minds of students.

An extremely important part of our strategic planning efforts relate to the fulfillment of student needs. Thus, our plans are an attempt to provide feelings of security, fun, freedom, belonging, and power for our students. We also realize that threat and coercion do not cause improvement. They may result in compliance with a set of minimal expectations if a person is so inclined but more often than not there will be students who will chose to fail. If our DREAM includes the idea that all people can learn, we cannot be content with some students choosing failure. Therefore, our strategies must fulfill needs rather than establish threats and punishments.

DECISION MAKING

Throughout the process of strategic planning, there will many more strategies developed than can possibly be implemented. It now becomes necessary to make some decisions concerning what will be implemented, what will be put on hold, and what will be scrapped. If students are to support our efforts in school improvement, they must have a voice and a choice. We believe the attached consensus building procedure helps everyone buy into our program.

ORGANIZATIONAL ACTIVITIES

To effectively lead students and teachers through to the shared decision-making needed in this restructuring model, the school will go through six distinct stages. These stages have been nicely explained by Willis Furtwengler in his article "Student Participation in Restructured Schools." (1991) Some of these will seem familiar whereas others may appear to be a bit unusual. The six stages are:

1. self study
2. leadership mobilization
3. major events
4. task action teams
5. reflection, rest, play
6. chaos

The following paragraphs paraphrase Dr. Furtwengler's work in a way that will be useful to most educators.

SELF-STUDY

In every organization looking to improve itself, it is necessary for organization members to take a careful look at how they are doing. This process, whether it's a formal questionnaire or an informal observation process, is the means for finding out what's going well in your organization and for finding out what you can do to make it even better. If you really want your school to take off, include the students in your self-study and then listen to what they say.

LEADERSHIP MOBILIZATION

When the self-study has been completed, a team of staff, students, parents, administrators, support staff members, and other community representatives, needs to review the study and come up with some goals to drive future improvements. These leaders need to feel that they can make a difference, that they have a voice and a choice. In addition they need to feel that they fairly represent their group of constituents and that the goals they have set are consistent with the school's beliefs about quality education.

MAJOR EVENTS

To help everyone in the school community gain an appreciation for the improvement goals and to elicit support for the efforts that will be needed to help us attain the goal, one or more major events need to be planned. A major event is an activity that differs from the normal, everyday activities that occur within the organization. We have used workshops, seminars, and even party-like situations to help create consensus for our restructuring goals.

TASK ACTION TEAMS

When everyone is committed to, it becomes time to put together task action teams. These teams will be responsible for coming up with the specific strategies that will be used to help increase the odds that we will be successful in our restructuring efforts. It is important that students be actively involved in the planning of these strategies. At Sturgis High School we have students working on task teams dealing with:

1. District-wide school restructuring plans
2. Improving work habits
3. Interpersonal relations
4. Curriculum review and development
5. School rules, expectations, and consequences
6. Global and environmental awareness
7. Interschool relationships and sportsmanship
8. Physical and emotional well being

We will create new task teams as they become necessary to help us meet our goals. Sometimes, as we investigate strategies for meeting our goals we begin to see the need for some task teams that will deal with specific groups of people or specific problems. One example was the creation of a task team on student activities which recommended the creation of a skate board club. This met the needs of a group of approximately 40 students that had not become part of our greater efforts to involve students in school restructuring. As a result of the creation of this organization many of these fringe students are beginning to participate in our school improvement efforts.

REFLECTION, REST, PLAY

All work and no play makes Jack and Jill dull students, teachers, parents, etc. It is important to realize that after intensive efforts to help restructure a school, people will need time to play, rest, and reflect about what has happened. Too often we ignore this aspect of our organizational development plan. It is during this phase that we celebrate our success.

CHAOS

The final stage of the process results after the organization members are rested, reflected, and played out. They are antsy, ready to get going yet not sure of their direction. It is at this point that chaos hits. It is the role of leaders in the organization to restart the cycle. Going back to the self-study stage will allow the organization to determine where they go next.

Although this looks like a cyclical series of events, I prefer not to look at it as a cycle but instead to view it as a spiral. With each turn of the spiral, we get closer and closer to our ultimate goal.

QUALITY CULTURE BELIEF STATEMENTS

In all quality cultures it is important that members of the organization have a common set of beliefs. When we look at successful schools, more often than not, we find the following quality culture beliefs:

1. All students can learn and participate in a wide range of quality improvement activities.
2. Improvement is a continuous and on going process.
3. All organization members need to be open to feedback.
4. Members of the organization need to extend trust to one another.
5. There is a general pride in the work that is done.
6. Resources are to be developed and shared and new sources are always being pursued.
7. Members need the freedom to innovate.
8. Active involvement is better than passive observation.
9. Dispersed leadership is better than autocratic rule.
10. There is a continuous assessment of the situation. Leadership is interested in what is happening, why it happens, if there are changes in the culture and what the causes might be for these changes.

GETTING STUDENTS INVOLVED

This is all wonderful philosophy but how do you get kids to be involved in the process? The answer to this question is really quite simple. In the words of Andrew Parial, Sturgis High School Student Body President, member of the District School Restructuring Team, and a member of the Communication Improvement Task Team, "you ask them!" Our experience has been that you start off with a few and as students see that they have a voice and a choice, it's easy to get more students involved. Success breeds success.

Of course, it is important to realize that student involvement requires that the ground work has already been laid. Trust is essential as are vision and caring concern. If those elements are present, you are ready. But who do you invite to get the ball rolling. What we did was start by seeking volunteers to serve as leaders for student task teams. These student task teams paralleled the staff school improvement teams. Each leader was given the responsibility of recruiting a minimum of 7 more students to serve on their team. These 7 students had to represent various factions of the school community and were not to be taken entirely from the student council.

As a result of these efforts, task teams were established that represented every aspect of our school community. Equal representation is important if all students are to feel empowered. Total student community empowerment is essential if you are to really impact the overall climate of the school. Missing a segment can fractionalize and polarize your student community.

SUMMARY

All too often students have been left out of the picture as active participants in school restructuring efforts. Wanting to include them, however, is not enough. Due to past conditioning, students are rarely able to step right in and sustain efforts and make a commitment towards school restructuring involvement. Thus, it is essential that a plan be developed for including students in your restructuring program.

At the heart of your school's student involvement program must be the notion of giving students a voice and a choice. Our emphasis must be their responsibility to help make things better than they have been. Our efforts must be directed towards helping them feel like they have been included, that they are under control of their own future, and that they are valued as people. When we have done this we will begin to see changes in our schools.

As schools change there are stages that they will go through. If we are aware of what these stages are, we will handle questions and concerns, about the process, more effectively. We must always remember, as administrators, that the success of our restructuring program is not dependent solely on us but is a community responsibility. Everyone plays a role in its success or failure. Our main responsibility is to make certain that all segments are represented and that each has a genuine "Voice" and a genuine "Choice" in the process.

REFERENCES

Furtwengler, W. J. Student participation in restructured schools. Boston: Paper presented to American Educational Research Association, 1990.

Furtwengler, W. J. Reducing student misbehavior through student involvement in school restructuring processes. Chicago: Paper presented to American Educational Research Association, 1991.

Glasser, W. The Quality School: Managing students without coercion. New York: Harper & Rowe, 1990.